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Document Title: "An Inconvenient Truth": Counter-Evidence

Author: Emma Kuby

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Fall 2008 Knight Award for Writing Exercises and Handouts

The Knight Award for Writing Exercises recognizes excellence in short exercises and/or handouts designed to improve student writing. Appropriate topics may be drawn from the whole range of writing issues, large scale to small scale, such as development of theses, use of secondary sources, organization of evidence, awareness of audience, attention to sentence patterns (e.g., passive/active voice, coordination/ subordination), attention to diction, uses of punctuation, attention to mechanics (e.g., manuscript formats, apostrophes). Exercises and handouts may be developed for use in and/or out of class.

Submissions should comprise three parts. (1) A copy of the handouts or instructions that go to students. (2) An explanation of the exercise/ handout and of the principles behind it addressed to future instructors who may use the material. (3) If possible, an example of a student response.

Submissions may range in length from one to four or five pages.

Winning Writing Exercises and Handouts will be deposited in a web accessible archive and made available to other instructors under a creative commons attribution, non-commercial license. (See creativecommons.org for more information about cc licensing)

The two winning entries will receive \$350, honorable mentions (if any) will receive \$125.

Submissions are due in 101 McGraw Hall by Friday, December 12. No exceptions can be made.

Fall 2008 Knight Award for Writing Exercises

~Please Print Clearly~

Instructor's name Emma Ruby
 Department History Course # and title History 1105: The Problem of Violence in Western

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An Improvement to the Counter-Evidence
 Title of Writing Exercises

Instructor's signature Emma Ruby Date 12/7/08

“An Inconvenient Truth”: Counter-Evidence

Emma Kuby

History FWS 1105

The Problem of Violence in Western Political Thought, 1776-2001

Abstract: In history – as in other disciplines – an ability to deal frankly and convincingly with facts that don’t seem to “fit” is a hallmark of truly excellent writing. A vigorous, conscious process of trying to engage with counter-evidence can also help students enormously in refining their theses as they proceed through multiple drafts of a paper. This in-class exercise is designed to give students an opportunity to develop their skills in working with counter-evidence. The handout explains (with examples from student work) what counter-evidence is, and provides some strategies for dealing with it successfully. The group writing activity then allows students to try out some of these strategies for themselves, and to reflect on the results.

“An Inconvenient Truth”: Counter-Evidence

History is complicated. Not all of the facts will always “fit” inside your thesis, no matter how complex and nuanced you make that thesis. What can you do with evidence that seems to run directly counter to the point you’d like to make?

You could ignore it – just leave it out of your paper entirely. And, indeed, when you’re working with a short amount of space, you may need to do this: you simply won’t have room in your paper for any evidence that doesn’t offer the strongest possible support for your argument.

However, eventually you’ll run into problems with this strategy. Readers might be aware of the counter-evidence – and therefore, when they see that your paper neglects it, they will discount your argument. They will suspect you are hiding a weakness in your case.

The **most sophisticated and convincing** papers, therefore, do not leave out counter-evidence – they tackle it head-on, and explain why their arguments stand up anyway.

What are some writing strategies for acknowledging counter-evidence?

- Concede the point with a sentence-structure that alerts readers to the fact that you’re **aware** that this evidence goes **against** your overall argument (“It is true that...”/ “We should acknowledge that...”).
- Be **brief**. You’re trying to demonstrate you’re *aware* of this evidence; you’re *not* trying to offer a sustained analysis of it. Consider dealing with the counter-evidence in a short sentence or clause (“Although [counter-evidence], nevertheless [back to your argument]”).
- Promptly **explain why your overall argument stands up anyway**. This may involve pointing out that the counter-evidence constitutes an isolated exception/ outlier, an unimportant issue, or a distraction from the main point. Some constructions you might use: “But overall...” / “However, as a rule...” / “Ultimately, though, the author backs away from this idea...” etc.

Here’s a great example from a recent essay by one of your classmates (his argument was that Georges Sorel should not be understood as a Marxist):

“It is irrefutable that Sorel did view the proletariat as a part of the revolution, and sympathized with proletarians’ struggles. But it cannot be said that Sorel was completely dedicated to the class, as Marx was. Although he viewed the proletariat as important, he did not see it as the only agent of revolution available, or as the class whose goals he most strongly supported.”

****If this process isn’t working easily for you – if you can’t find a convincing way to make your argument stand up to the weight of the counter-evidence – it’s a good sign that you may need to **modify your thesis**, making it more nuanced or qualified in order to account for the counter-evidence. Indeed, challenging yourself to deal with any counter-evidence you come across, instead of ignoring it, is a great way to work on improving your thesis. A truly strong thesis will not collapse when confronted with an “inconvenient truth.” ****

Counter-Evidence Exercise

This group activity is designed to help you develop your ability to deal with counter-evidence. Imagine that you are working on a short paper about the Weather Underground movement. The information on this sheet represents some preliminary notes you've taken, including a rough version of your thesis, some points of evidence that tend to support your thesis, and one troubling piece of counter-evidence.

Your group's job is to draft a paragraph for the body of your paper using these materials. You must include the counter-evidence. You may alter the thesis if you believe that a modified version of it would better account for the available evidence. Group will share their paragraphs with the class.

Your proposed thesis: The Weather Underground is mischaracterized by those who describe it as a murderously violent group: its members may have used a great deal of violent language, but in reality they confined themselves to minor, symbolic acts, abstaining from causing serious harm to their fellow human beings.

Your pieces of evidence:

Most Weatherman bombings targeted empty military and police installations at night, and thus did not threaten the lives of any people. They preceded bombings with announcements, warning people to evacuate the buildings.

Weather Underground member Phoebe Hirsch remembers the most audacious act of violence that she engaged in as a group member: she "socked [a] cop."

During their "Days of Rage" protest in Chicago in 1969, the Weathermen clashed seriously with police. But although six Weathermen were wounded by gunfire from the police, no policemen were seriously injured.

Throughout their existence, the Weather Underground members were not deliberately responsible for any deaths.

As Weather Underground member Bill Ayers wrote later, "We were very careful...to be sure we weren't going to hurt anybody, and we never did hurt anybody. Whenever we put a bomb in a public space, we had figured out all kinds of ways to put checks and balances on the thing and also to get people away from it, and we were remarkably successful."

The "inconvenient truth" you must incorporate:

The Weather Underground's campaign did cause three deaths: on March 6, 1970, three of the movement's own members were killed accidentally while they prepared a bomb. Historians have pointed out that this bomb, had it not accidentally exploded early, would likely have killed innocents. As historian Harvey Klehr writes, "The only reason they were not guilty of mass murder is mere incompetence. I don't know what sort of defense that is."

Explanation of this exercise for other instructors

In history – as in other disciplines – an ability to deal frankly and convincingly with facts that don't seem to “fit” is a hallmark of truly excellent writing. A vigorous, conscious process of trying to engage with counter-evidence can also help students enormously in refining their theses as they proceed through multiple drafts of a paper.

I designed this handout and in-class exercise for use fairly late in the semester (mid-November). Students had been working at this point for many weeks on thesis development, argument, and the use of evidence. Several of them had already begun, on their own, to acknowledge the existence of counter-evidence in their writing. But the majority of students were still ignoring or glossing over the points that did not mesh perfectly with their theses. Some had started to ask me questions about this, both in class and in individual writing conferences, so I decided a handout and group exercise would help clarify the issue for everyone. We happened to be reading about the Weather Underground that week; I imagine this activity could be revised easily to use material on practically any topic your class happens to be working on.

I began the exercise by sharing with the class on an overhead projector the passage from a student paper included in the handout. I asked the students what they thought this author was doing that had impressed me as a reader; they got it very quickly. I then asked them what they thought “counter-evidence” was, and elicited some good answers; at this point, I passed out the handout and worked through it with them, laying particular emphasis on the final point about staying open to revising/refining your thesis as you continue to think about the available evidence. Then I divided students into groups of three and set them to work on the group exercise. Students enjoyed the group work, and spent a lot of time arguing with their partners about what approach to take. They also had fun presenting their paragraphs to the other groups. About half of the groups incorporated the counter-evidence without altering the thesis; the other half made revisions to the thesis. For my class, incidentally, this activity spontaneously generated an interesting discussion about the nature of historical evidence in general: the piece of counter-evidence I used here includes reference to what *might* have happened, had an accident not intervened, and students got into a passionate discussion about whether this even “counted” as evidence.

I followed up on this activity by urging students to consider and incorporate counter-evidence in their final two essay assignments for the class, and asking them in an in-class freewriting exercise in the middle of the Essay 5 drafting process to reflect on how they might do so. Many did try it, in general quite effectively.